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The New Caledonian Referendum on Independence (Part 3): Key Issues

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On 4 November 2018, eligible New Caledonian voters will participate in a referendum on whether the territory will become independent from France. President Emmanuel Macron made his first visit to the territory on 3–5 May and committed to respect the outcome of the vote, as did his predecessor François Hollande. Macron added that 'France would not be the same without New Caledonia'. His visit coincided with the marking of 30 years since the deaths of 21 people during a French military operation to rescue gendarmes taken hostage by pro-independence partisans on the island of Ouvéa in 1988 (Fisher 4/5/2018). A year later, widely respected pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou was gunned down while observing a commemoration for the 19 Kanak victims. Some local groups opposed President Macron's attendance at the commemoration, reinforcing the sense that, although New Caledonia has come a long way since the violence of the 1980s, the past remains present and painful in local memory. Macron's visit also coincided with the 20-year anniversary of the Noumea Accord, which consolidated peace and created New Caledonia's present political institutions.

Local political parties have long been focused on the upcoming vote. With less than six months until the referendum, this In Brief, building on Parts 1 and 2 (Robertson 2017, 2018), focuses on three major issues likely to feature in the vote: the economy, security, and citizenship and identity.

The economy

New Caledonia and the other Pacific French territories — French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna — enjoy substantially higher standards of living, access to infrastructure, health and education services than other Pacific island states and territories, largely due to the budgetary assistance of France. New Caledonia also generates significant wealth from its nickel sector, accounting for roughly one quarter of global deposits and being the world's second largest exporter.

France spends approximately AU$1.5 billion annually in New Caledonia, which includes the salaries and pensions of public servants such as the police, military and prison officers. The French also fund development contracts with the three provincial governments for various infrastructure and development programs.

The New Caledonian economy remains dependent on French state support, which contributes to the high cost of living. For 30 years the Kanak independence movement has emphasised the need for greater control over the nickel sector in order to build the territory's economic autonomy, especially through the Koniambo nickel mine in North Province. However, recent low nickel prices have necessitated French government intervention in order to prevent job losses in the nickel sector. Attempts to diversify the local economy towards tourism, aquaculture and other sectors have struggled.

It is widely acknowledged that New Caledonia's standard of living will fall if independence is achieved, although current prosperity remains heavily concentrated in the hands of a mostly European minority, even if conditions have improved for many as a result of certain 'rebalancing' policy measures since the 1990s (Ris 28/9/2016). Though Kanak have enjoyed equal legal citizenship since 1946, this has not translated to equal social and economic outcomes. Pro-independence advocates argue that much of France's expenditure returns to France in different forms.

Security

Political discourse has long been dominated by concerns over allegedly rising levels of crime, youth delinquency, and drug and alcohol abuse, primarily among Kanak youth. Conservative loyalist figures have demanded increased measures to combat crime, including more police and programs for recidivist youth. Since law enforcement, including local municipal police and the gendarmerie, remain under metropolitan control, loyalist parties continue to see current security problems as a portent of what independence might entail.

In response, the French government has announced increased resources to meet the perceived security challenge, with President Macron stating he considered 'France necessary to maintain the peace' among New Caledonia's population. Visiting Pierre-Lenquette, one of Noumea's most disadvantaged communities, he announced that his government would fund a special security force to combat petty crime and delinquency (Ponchelet 4/5/2018). The French government also committed to expanding the 'Adapted Military Service' program designed to provide skills and grounding to youth who have failed to complete their schooling.

The Customary Senate, a consultative institution created under the Noumea Accord to represent Kanak custom, has been working with delinquent youth who are often framed as having lost their cultural and social bearings. However, their calls for increased resources have been either ignored or rebuffed by the loyalist legislators. The pro-independence parties have spoken of the structural inequalities that persist between the Kanak and non-Kanak populations, where a lack of jobs and educational success prevent Kanak youth from integrating into mainstream society. Kanak individuals dominate the incarcerated population in 'Camp-Est', the infamous Nouville prison ranked as having among the worst conditions in the French Republic.

Citizenship and identity

These issues of economic prosperity, standard of living and security form part of broader questions about citizenship and belonging. New Caledonians are French citizens and possess the same rights as their metropolitan counterparts. The same is not true for all French citizens who come to New Caledonia. As a result of the 1998 Noumea Accord, French citizens must have arrived prior to 5 May 1998 to have New Caledonian citizenship, which determines who can vote in local provincial elections and serves as a basis for preference in certain job sectors. French and European courts justified this distinction between French and New Caledonian people because of the decolonisation process in place and the impact of French migration on Kanak self-determination, but noted that this would be temporary until the referendum process had been completed. One of the critical questions is therefore what New Caledonian citizenship would entail if there is a 'no' vote to independence.

Both the French government and the Kanak independence movement have stated that dual nationality would be possible in the event of independence, though some anti-independence parties have argued New Caledonians should lose their French nationality.

While the days of Jacobin French republican ideology, which sought to efface the very essence of New Caledonian autonomy, have receded, there remains a strong identification with France that goes beyond a simple economic question. Students still overwhelmingly study in French universities, and many New Caledonians have family members who live there. However, this must be balanced with an increased recognition of New Caledonia's place in the Pacific region, including personal, economic and cultural ties with Australia and New Zealand and how New Caledonia is impacted by the growing power of China in the South Pacific.

This shared citizenship exists between New Caledonia and other French territories of the Pacific, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. For example, the French government pays the New Caledonian hospital system to treat and host patients from Wallis and Futuna, which does not have access to the same health facilities. Independence, therefore, would result at least in a renegotiation of relations between these territories.

It is not possible to discuss the many other aspects to the question of independence in this short paper. Just as intriguing is what will happen in the event of a 'no' vote — still the most likely outcome, but far from guaranteed. Will pro-independence political leaders decide to pursue a second and even a third referendum? Will anti-independence leaders make further concessions, such as even greater local autonomy, to remove independence from the table? What is essential is that the long anticipated referendum takes place and that it is legitimate and its outcome reflects the will of those who call the territory home.

Author notes

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